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Washington University in St. Louis

BETWIXT / BETWEEN

Hybridity in Asian American and Christian Identities

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Capstone Studio II

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ABSTRACT

Between/Betwixt presents a body of work exploring hybridity in Asian American and Christian identities. Hybridity is defined as the fusion of worlds that were once thought of separate in one's inner self. Both cultural and religious identity are sites of hybridity and dialogue with one another to shape understandings of what is sacred and profane. The questions driving this body of work are: What is the appropriate relationship between religion and culture? To what extent is one called to one give up or preserve culture in the practice of religion? My research explores historical accounts and anecdotes in which cultural understanding shapes expressions of faith. My own practice takes elements of Eastern and Western visual culture and art history and frames them within a Christian perspective using painting, printmaking, and installation. By participating in the legacy of religious art through a hybrid lens, I seek to adopt cultural ownership of Christianity.

Betwixt/Between: Hybridity in Asian American and Christian Identities

In a globalized world, virtually everyone enters into some level of hybrid experience. A Manhattanite has Ethiopian food for lunch between meetings, and a Japanese high schooler listens to French R&B on Spotify. Theologian Julius Kei Kato defines hybrid individuals as, “people with many ‘worlds’ within them. These ‘worlds’ were once thought of as separate and distinct from each other, but they have now *met, mixed, fused, and become part* of the hybrid person’s inner self” (Kato vii).

The present research investigates hybridity in Asian American and Christian identities. Hybridity is part and parcel of immigrant and minority experiences, as individuals navigate between two cultures. Hybridity is also a theme within Christianity, where believers are called to live between the heavenly and earthly realms. Because of Christianity’s Euro-centric legacy, immigrant Christians in America take on another hybrid identity by participating in an “American” religion, while being ethnically other. The artwork of my thesis draws on classical and contemporary sources from East and West to create representations of hybrid identity within the lineage of religious art.

Immigrants and minority groups find themselves in two worlds, if not more, and are forced to navigate between them in order to form their own identities. For example, one ethnically Chinese family in the United States may eat traditional Chinese food with rice at every meal, served family style with bowls and chopsticks; where another may prefer pasta with salad, served with individual place settings, plates, and silverware. Similar decisions are made across domains of culture, including the language spoken at home, housekeeping practices, what sports

to play, and the list goes on. Hybrid identity exists along a spectrum that goes from one world to the next. Though even a spectrum is too linear once a third culture is added into the mix— for example, a family that is ethnically Thai might move to Japan, then immigrate to America. Perhaps a better illustration for hybridity is that of a electron, bouncing between the nuclei of atoms in a shared bond. It exists as part of a larger molecule where these once discrete elements are held together, but at one moment, the electron is closer to one atom, and then in another moment, another.

The experience of betweenness is also an integral part of the Christian life. The book of Hebrews describes Biblical persons of faith as, “alien and strangers on earth” (*New International Version*, Heb. 11.13). Another passage exhorts believers to not “conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (*New International Version*, Romans 12.2). Part of the Christian life is existing between the earthly and spiritual worlds.

Bill Viola’s video work, *The Crossing* (Fig. 1) can be read as showing the spiritual transfiguration from earthly to supernatural. The video begins with a standing figure, and shows a great quantity of water poured over him. The water cascades off the man’s shoulders, suggesting the shape of wings. Eventually, the water obscures the figure, and when it dissipates, the man is gone. The work parallels the rite of baptism, which symbolizes the death of the old self and the birth of a new self in Christ. It is the crossing from one world to another.



Fig. 1. Viola, Bill. *The Crossing*. 1996. Digital image. Artstor. ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York. Web. 5 May 2017. Digital Image.

Though Christian doctrine is explicit about the crossing over from one way of life to another, there are a plethora of ways people interpret the practice of living a Christian life. Inevitably, expressions of faith take shape within the cultures we exist in. This can be fruitful in allowing individuals to create new, unique expressions of faith. For example, in Asian cultures where verbal affirmations are not as common, food and hospitality play large roles in expressing generosity, and at times love, towards others. Histories of food scarcity in certain Asian countries give weight to the act of sharing food. The Korean American church practices “ricing” culture that involves monthly gatherings where members of the church practice hospitality by preparing abundant quantities of food and inviting large groups of friends and church members over to eat. The food itself is a fusion, with a few staple Korean dishes and many “fusion dishes that have no clear national/ethnic affiliations” (Pak et. al., 88). Ricing culture is an adaptation of Korean food culture to an expression of faith.

The hospitality expressed in ricing culture has parallels in the collaborative artwork *DO WE DREAM UNDER THE SAME SKY*, by artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, architects Nikolaus Hirsch & Michel Müller, and chef Antto Melasniemi at Art Basel 2015. The installation included a bamboo and steel structure where visitors were invited to engage in open conversations with one another and eat. The artist and chef created a “hybrid menu of Thai-Finnish recipes, including fish ice cream and what they call a ‘bastard’ pad Thai” (e-flux.com). The piece uses food as an invitation to create relationships between visitors, and a way to explore the hybridities between Asian and Western food and architecture.

Cultural understandings of sacred and profane have the potential to lead to new expressions of faith, but can also result in the exclusion of other peoples or cultures. In the sixteenth century, Catholic Milanese explorer Girolamo Benzoni, wrote an account of the indigenous people of New Spain. He observed that “the women who prepared the bread ‘did not care if any hairs fall into it, or even some lice’” and to prepare maize wine, would put maize “‘into their mouths and gradually chew it’ and then ‘almost cough it out’ into the pots where it would ferment” (Albala and Eden 83). He expressed disgust towards the American food. His cultural understanding of cleanliness lead him to reject the American bread and wine as something that could be used in the sacrament of communion. Spanish missionaries in Peru during the same time period “felt they had to intervene when one converted native ‘said the [maize wine] was the blood of Jesus Christ’ and used it in an indigenized holy communion” (Albala and Eden 91). Cultural understandings of cleanliness informed both what the American and the missionaries thought of as acceptable practices of faith.

In present day America, Christianity plays a large cultural role in addition to its spiritual one. In recent times, Christianity has fallen out of favor with mainstream culture. A Christian

persecution watchdog group states, “Christians in the US are facing constant attacks in the media, where they are portrayed as bigoted, racist, sexist, and close-minded” (persecution.org). Nevertheless, Christianity remains the most commonly practiced religion in America. The influence of America’s Puritan forefathers can be seen throughout national culture, from the song “God Bless America”, to “In God We Trust” written on the backs of quarters. When one says “Christianity”, they may be referring to a set of spiritual beliefs and practices, or an element in American culture. People may practice Christianity culturally by celebrating Christmas and Easter at a church, without believing in the philosophy contained in the Bible or spiritually practicing as Christians.

For non-white Christians in general and Asian American Christians in the context of this research, participation in Christianity represents another foray into hybridity. Christianity is often seen as a Western religion, and choosing into it could mean giving up native practices to assimilate to practices from the dominant American culture. An immigrant from Laos who converted to Christianity wrote about her experience navigating cultural and religious hybridity.

Within the Buddhist tradition, there is a ceremonial gathering called ‘su kwan’ roughly translated as ‘calling of the soul’ for life events including weddings, funerals, and overcoming illnesses. It is a time of prayer blessings that involves sacrifices of food, lighting of candles and is a common practice within the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Once I fully surrendered my life to the Lord Jesus Christ at age 15, I no longer felt at peace with participating in the ‘su kwan’ ritual. It created a divisive strain between me and my family, especially with my Mom... she thought this meant I would deny all things Lao. (Khamphuovong 47)

The narrator refrains from participation in this culturally significant ritual as a practice of her Christian identity. In another account, the author describes her grandma's rejection of Korean drums used in church worship. "Then my grandmother said in a rather reflective yet serious voice, 'Korean drumming reminds me of the old days when I used to attend shamanistic rituals (kut). We cannot turn the holy sanctuary into a place where shamanistic rituals take place (kut-dang).'" (Pak et. al. 31) For the author's grandmother, the use of Korean drums was inextricable from a non-Christian religious context, so she felt they were not appropriate for Christian worship.

The line between what is holy and not is often one drawn by conscience. The cultural conceptions of what is Christian lean heavily Euro-centric, because of the long relationships between Christianity and national culture in many European countries. Of specific interest to this research are the religious masterworks of the Italian Renaissance and the large role they play in shaping ideas of what religious art looks like. The relative anonymity of non-Western representations of Christianity can result in the rejection of these cultures as unfit for engaging with the sacred. This diminishes the range of expression in the Christian church and leads to unhealthy ethnocentrism that is not in line with a Christian worldview.

In my thesis work, I draw from culturally hybrid sources to participate in the legacy of creating religious artwork from an Asian American perspective. I use Biblical themes and narratives as starting points, and appropriate elements from Eastern and Western culture and art history. I began by painting Asian figures in spiritual situations. *Ji* (Fig.2) features an Asian American woman whose expression is reminiscent of that of the saint in Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (see fig. 3). The line work surrounding the portrait references the form of a stained glass window, or an arcade containing a saint, while the patterning is derived from traditional

Chinese ink drawings. The paintings pointedly feature Asian subjects to include them within the narrative of religious art. *Peter* (Fig. 4) references the narrative and pose of St. Peter in Massaccio's fresco, *The Tribute Money*, in the Brancacci Chapel (see fig. 5). It casts a Korean American model in the role of St. Peter.



Fig. 2. (Left) *Ji*. 2017. Sherry Xiao.



Fig. 4. (Right) *Peter*. 2017. Sherry Xiao.

Author Madeline L'Engle writes on representation in religious icons saying, "The figure on the icon is not meant to represent literally what Peter or John or any of the apostles looked like [...] the orthodox painter feels, Jesus of Nazareth did not walk around Galilee faceless. The icon of Jesus may not look like the man Jesus two thousand years ago, but it represents some quality of Jesus" (L'Engle, 23). Though St. Peter was not Asian, the Asian man in this painting functions as an allegory. It represents Asian Christians as participants in this Biblical narrative and in the history of the church as a whole. In the same way, Renaissance frescoes with Italian figures in contemporary dress helped the viewing public relate to the narratives being told. The

translation of the Bible into languages other than Hebrew and Greek is also a way in which the content of the text becomes culturally accessible to an audience. These reinterpretations of texts facilitate a broader and deeper understanding of the source material. In the words of Pablo Picasso, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.”

Bill Viola, mentioned earlier as the creator of *The Crossing*, also reinterprets scenes and poses from Renaissance works in his video pieces. *The Emergence*, is inspired by a Masolino da Panicale fresco, and *The Greeting*, is after Pontormo’s *La Visitation*. In doing so, he translates aged images into the younger medium of video that makes the content relevant to a contemporary audience. Viola uses the motif of water in his works about spirituality, including the afore-mentioned *The Crossing* and *The Emergence*. A Christian reading draws ties to baptism, and the Holy Spirit, which is described as “rivers of living water” (*New International Version*, John 7.38). The use of drips in my paintings are also in reference to the transfiguration achieved by water, and anointing by oil.

In *Alabaster Jar* (see fig. 6), I use drips as a pictorial device for obscuring the figure. The painting references the biblical narrative of Mary of Bethany, a woman who takes a jar of expensive perfume, likely her life savings, and breaks it at Jesus’s feet in a extravagant, and as some of Jesus’s disciples decry, wasteful act of worship. In the painting, I painted the figure merging into the background and disrupted the visual dominance of the figure using a pattern across the surface of the canvas. The subject is between the world of being and of disappearing, subsumed by the spiritual realm the sacrifice exists in.

The theme of sacrifice lies at the crux of Christianity in Jesus’s death on the cross redeeming mankind from sin. Within the church, this act is remembered through the rite of communion. My piece, *Broken for You*, presents a Chinese-American restaging of communion. I

used the disposable, cheap form of the takeout box, which was invented in Chicago in the 1800s. I elevated it to be a container for the blood and body of Christ, represented by wine in a Dixie cup, and *mantou*, a Chinese breakfast bun, respectively (Fig. 7). The piece conflates an icon of cheap restaurant food with the sacred rite of communion to question distinctions of sacred and profane.



Fig. 7. *Broken for You* (2017). Sherry Xiao.

The interior of the boxes are painted gold, a recurring motif in this body of work. Gold was used to symbolize paradise in Byzantine Christian art and often appeared in immersive ceiling mosaics. In Gothic and Renaissance art, gold continued to be used in halos and backgrounds symbolizing heaven. Gold carries symbolic meaning in Asian traditions as well. In Buddhist Japanese art from the 1200s, gold was used for images of deities (Honolulu Museum of Art). It was later adopted by the *nihonga* painters of the modern era who used gold in

conjunction with oil paint to create a distinctly Japanese interpretation of the Western tradition of oil painting (see fig. 8).

Contemporary Chinese painter Yu Hong, references these associations as well in her series, *Golden Sky* (Fig. 8). The work consists of four sets of paintings that show figures, often in charged social situations, against a backdrop of solid gold paint. The content comments on the moral climate of contemporary Chinese society from a humanistic viewpoint. The paintings reference both Renaissance and Buddhist cave paintings and were exhibited in the ceilings of the gallery.



Fig. 8. One of four polyptychs. *Natural Selection*. 2010. Yu Hong. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing. from “Ullens Center of Contemporary Art. Web.”

Risen (Fig. 10) is a 22 foot scroll that makes use of symbolic colors apart from gold. It is inspired by wordless books, a common Sunday school exercise. Children are taught to make blank books whose colored pages represent parts of the gospel. The first three colors in these books are black, red, and white; symbolizing sin, blood, and being made white as snow. I hand-printed the colors in a gradient onto rice paper, and conjoined the pieces of paper to make one continuous scroll. I installed the scroll alone, in a form reminiscent of Chinese wall hangings used

to decorate homes. These wall hangings are meant to bring prosperity and good luck, and occasionally show images of traditional household gods. In this work, the wall hanging references transfiguration from one world to another.

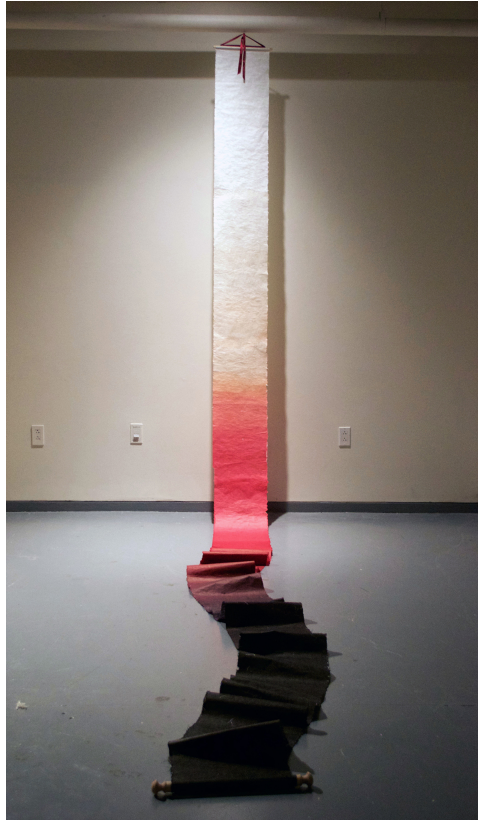


Fig. 10. *Risen* (2017). Sherry Xiao.

My practice takes elements of Asian and Western visual culture and frames them within a Christian perspective. The paintings place Asian subjects at the center of scenes historically visually occupied by white subjects to create allegorical understanding. By participating in the legacy of religious art, I seek to adopt cultural ownership of Christianity.

The questions that inspired the work remain: What is the appropriate relationship between religion and culture? To what extent is one called to one give up or preserve culture in the practice of religion? The work uses hybrid sources to understand hybrid experiences. It does not, however, provide succinct answers to these questions. The act of creating is a search for

physical manifestations of how these ideas exist in the world. It is an act of faith that trusts that the core truths that resonated at the beginning will persist in the end; and allowing the work, the self, and the world be changed in the in between.

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FIGURES

Fig. 1 Viola, Bill. *The Crossing*. Digital image. Artstor. N.p., n.d. Web. 5 May 2017.

Fig. 2. *Ji*. 2017. Sherry Xiao.

Fig. 3. Detail of St. Theresa from Bernini, Giovanni Lorenzo, *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*.

1645-1652 CE. Artstor. ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York. Web. 5 May 2017. Digital Image.



Fig. 4. *Peter*. 2017. Sherry Xiao.

Fig. 5. Masaccio. *The Tribute Money*. 1425. Artstor. ARTstor, Inc., New York, New York. Web. 5 May 2017. Digital Image.

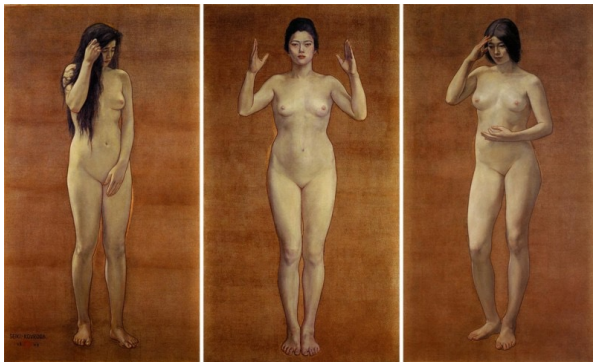


Fig. 6. *Alabster Jar* (2017). Sherry Xiao.



Fig. 7. *Broken for You* (2017). Sherry Xiao.

Fig. 8. *Triptych: Wisdom Impression Sentiment* (before 1898). Kuroda Seiki. Kuroda Memorial



Hall, Tokyo. from “Wikimedia Commons. Web.”

Fig. 9. One of four polyptychs. *Natural Selection*. 2010. Yu Hong. Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing. from “Ullens Center of Contemporary Art. Web.”

Fig. 10. *Risen* (2017). Sherry Xiao.